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ABSTRACT

Because it focuses on questions of communication, the experimental theatre of the 1970s, particularly that created by Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman, can be analyzed according to two distinct theories regarding the communication process. The first theory defines communication as a process in which the communicator selects and transmits messages to a receiver using both verbal and nonverbal channels and with the receiver providing the feedback; the second describes the communication process as the encoding and decoding of messages. To deepen his understanding of nonverbal channels, Wilson explored a wide range of body exercises and examined the atypical perceptual world of the deaf, brain damaged, and mentally ill; he also produced unique images from his own imagination. In his theatre pieces, Wilson uses pacing, lack of assigned meaning, and redundancy to present new understandings and perceptions to the spectator. In contrast, Foreman's vision turns inward and involves minute examination of the process that transforms the perceptual field into perception. Foreman's theatre pieces, which center on the manner in which perceptions are decoded, take the form of a series of tableaux that are continuously being composed, held, and recomposed for the viewer to decode. (MAI)

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STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION IN RECENT EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE

The purpose of this paper is to see what we might learn about recent experimental theatre by examining it from a perspective of communications, and what we might learn about communication by looking at recent experimental theatre. I will begin by defining some of the terms I am using.

I don't know whether more has been written about what is the definition of communication or about what is the definition of theatre, but there is clearly a great deal to choose from in either case. For our purposes, the model of the communication process developed by Westley and MacLean (1) seems to be an appropriate starting point. In this model, communications is viewed as a process, in which a communicator selects elements from the "sensory field" he inhabits, and transmits them, using various channels, verbal and non-verbal, to a receiver. The receiver not only receives the messages, but is also aroused to a continuous, and often unintentional, response to them, which is called "feedback." Another concept of communications theory that bears heavily on our subject is that the communicator goes through a process whereby he "encodes" his message, appropriate to the particular channels being employed to transmit that message, and the receiver goes through an opposite process, "decoding" the message in a manner appropriate to the various verbal and non-verbal channels being employed. As we shall see, this "decoding" process becomes the focus of many of the communications strategies of current experimental theatre.

It is now appropriate to define what I mean by experimental theatre, and I shall seek to do so in terms that do not raise the questions which continue around our use of the term "communication," which I realize is but one of many ways of

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using that term. Like communication, theatre is a process, which takes the form of performers appearing before a live audience. Each performance of a theatre piece leaves some artifacts, including various descriptions of that theatre piece, a dramatic text or scenario which presents an outline of that theatre piece in verbal form, photographs, drawings, and other iconographic representations of the theatre piece, and the memories of that theatre piece in the minds of those people who saw it and those who performed it. The accumulation of these artifacts in a systematic manner becomes the "history of the art of the theatre," and as with the other arts, an examination of that history reveals continual changes in both the form and content of the artifacts that comprise that history. Like our cars and our clothing, the forms and contents of our art seem to wear out, become dated, somehow inappropriate to the expression of whatever it is contemporary artists want them to express. Looked at over time, the history of any art, at least in the West, sees that art take on some of the characteristics of a living organism, in that it continually is in need of ingesting new materials and ridding itself of old materials which once gave it nourishment but which it has now used up and turned to waste. Like a living organism, each art is continuously involved in a process of adaptation and growth, again a process it shares with the other institutions of Western society.

Part of this process has been natural and evolutionary; people no longer write plays about romances that develop on transatlantic steamer crossings. Part of the process of change, however, takes the form of various theatre artists purposefully tinkering with the mechanism. At least as far back as the work of the visionary Russian director, Vesevelod Meyerhold, who looked upon the theatre as a laboratory in which various hypotheses could be established about the form the theatre should take, and then the various components of theatre manipulated to test those hypotheses, the theatre has been the subject of conscious experimentation by artists trying new and different combinations of formal elements. The names of these artists make up a roll call of the individuals who have shaped theatre during our century: Vakhtangov, Tairov, Piscator, Brecht, Artaud, Peter Brook, Swaboda, Grotowski, each distinguished by an unwillingness to accept theatre as he had found it, and by a continual search for new arrangements of formal elements. In the 1960's the names of American theatre artists begin to be added to this list; Julian Beck and Judith Malina and their Living Theatre, Joseph Chaiken and The Open Theatre, Andre Gregory and The Manhattan Project, Richard Schechner and The Performance Group to name a few. All art forms in the twentieth

century have undergone constant and considerable change, and the major artists of our century have not been the individuals who have brought old styles to new levels of perfection, but rather the people who have broken down the old forms, and imposed their idiosyncratic vision on the field of art in which they were working, until it was recognized that this vision had general validity as well.

Mortenson reminds us that "man's need to create images of his experiences . . . and to share them with others . . . is ineradicable." (2) The theatre has been a prime location for the display of these images throughout the entire history of Western civilization, the sharing of these images becomes an experience of profound intensity for the spectators, in part because of the presence of living actors bearing those images. Communications theory has suggested the enormous complexity of the multi-channel messages that are transmitted in inter-personal encounters, and the theatre becomes a form in which that complexity can be exploited.

About a century ago Naturalism appeared in the European theatre, and there is no question but that in its early manifestations such artists as Zola, Ibsen, and Antoine were using the form experimentally. Zola tells us as much explicitly. To refer to our communication model, the spectator was placed within a sensory field in which all of the message channels contained messages that were to be decoded as if they were the same as actuality. Moreover, the essential "meaning" of the play was carried in the verbal language of the play, and all of the elements of the theatrical representation, all of the extensive non-verbal material that accompanied the language of the play was meant to be decoded within the context of the straightforward and pursuasively logical verbal material. The act of being a spectator, of participating in the communication process that occured in the theatre, was largely reduced to the act of receiving the verbal messages, enhanced by elaborate complementary non-verbal messages, and decoding these messages as if they were being transmitted, not by performers in a fictional structure, but rather by real people. The spectator more or less assumed the naive position that the various elements of the theatre piece signified identical elements of reality, and were to be understood, or decoded, as such.

A major thrust of the experimental theatre during this century has been to focus on the decoding process, disrupt its operation, and force the spectator to carry out that process with much greater sophistication. The decoding process must now

take into account the fact that the channels used to communicate are derived consciously and artificially, and are not identical to the channels that exist outside of the theatre. Along with this came the sense that the naturalistic theatre had erred in reducing reality to whatever could be analyzed by means of discursive language, and a variety of experiments were undertaken to examine reality in less limited terms, and to seek to communicate the results of these explorations to theatre audiences.

I would like to direct my attention to the work of two noteworthy theatrical experimenters who are currently active, Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman. These two artists have been widely regarded as doing significant innovative work, and as we shall see, this work can be examined profitably from the perspective of communication theory.

Robert Wilson is a Texan, educated at the University of Texas and Pratt Institute, where he took a degree in architecture. He spent some time working as a painter, before descovering that the theatre was the medium in which he could work out his ideas most effectively. Important in the development of Wilson's ideas has been his long-term involvement in working with children who were brain-damaged, deaf, or suffering from other perceptual dysfunctions, or children who have been considered emotionally disturbed.

One of the activities which has helped Wilson synthesize his work and theories has been his association with Daniel Stern, a physician working at the New York State Psychiatric institute, doing research in the area of kinesics. Wilson speaks of some research in which Stern filmed the interactions of three hundred mothers and their babies, involving the baby crying and the mother picking it up. When the films were examined in extreme slow motion, frame by frame, it was discovered that the mothers' initial reaction, in most cases, was to lunge at the baby, and the babies' initial reaction, in turn, was to recoil in terror. Wilson explains, "So many different <u>things</u> are going on, and the baby is picking them up. I'd like to deal with some of these things in the theatre, if that's possible. I guess what I'm really interested in is communication." (3) To refer back to our communication model, we spoke of communications as a process that involves the use of many different channels simultaneously. Wilson is trying to examine exactly what takes place along the non-verbal channels. What are these non-verbal activities which we both perceive and transmit regularly, but are never consciously aware of? How can these activities be presented consciously by the performer so that they can enter into the spectator's awarness?

To develop his awareness and understanding of these non-verbal channels, Wilson and the people he has worked with have explored a wide range of body exercises. His exercises do not, however, take the form of a regular, systematic series of movements taught by a leader and then copied by a group. They rather seek to develop the individual's awareness of his or her own body, and develop ways of learning about the unique way his or her body moves. In one early workshop exercise, for example, Wilson turns out the lights, "so they can't see themselves seeing one another or so they can't see anyone seeing themselves. And then I have them just move and try to feel that experience of their bodies moving and then think how their body is special—it's not like anyone else's—and also to pay attention to what's happening when their body is moving." (4) At another time Wilson has said, "Maybe the most important thing we've done is to put across this sense of individual vocabularies of movement . . . Ideally, I guess, what we'd like to do onstage is to present ourselves. Each one presenting himself individually, and at the same time trying to be aware as much as possible of what's happening as a whole group. Not trying to design it or anything—just trying to be aware of it." (5)

A second source of awarness of non-verbal channels for Wilson comes from examining the nature of the world that is perceived by individuals who have distinctive perceptual apparatuses. The deaf child, for example, may be severely restricted in his use of verbal language, but he has compensated for this by developing awarenesses and sensitivities to non-verbal channels of communication that go unnoticed by people who use verbal language regularly. Wilson has frequently placed people with atypical perceptual characteristics at the center of the process of creating and performing his theatre pieces, as he did with Raymond Andrews, a deaf child who appeared in Wilson's The King of Spain, and Christopher Knowles, variously described as autistic or brain damaged, with whom Wilson created A Letter for Queen Victoria, and others, some diagnosed as being mentally ill yet capable of contributing to the process of creating and performing theatre pieces, while being effectively integrated into the society of those working on the production and performance of the theatre piece. Wilson is apparently capable of creating an atmosphere where individuals are valued for their unique capacities, an atmosphere in which individuals contribute, freely and openly, from the deepest levels of their experience.

A third source of materials for his theatre pieces are a variety of visual images Wilson draws from his own imagination, images which a number of critics consider related to surrealism.

In his "Open Letter to Andre Breton," Louis Aragon writes to his former, now deceased friend and author of the surrealist manifestos, "I never saw anything more beautiful in the world since I was born. . . . it is at once life awake and the life of closed eyes, . . . reality mingle[d] with dreams . . . Bob Wilson's piece . . . is not surrealism, . . . but it is what we others, who fathered surrealism, what we dreamed it might become after us, beyond us." (6) Calvin Tomkins describes one of these images in The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin: "The lights dim and, to the music of 'The Blue Danube,' sixty Southern mammies—in blackface, wearing long red skirts, gray blouses, white aprons, and pillows front and rear—do the famous Wilson mammy dance. It is hard to believe, at this particular moment in history, that anyone but Wilson would have thought of putting sixty black mammies on the stage. Even those who dislike his work, though, are inclined to concede that the mammy dance is very funny. It is also, for unfathomable reasons that go beyond the aesthetics of lighting and costuming and choreography, almost unbelievebly beautiful." (7)

Thus, there appear to be three primary sources that Wilson uses to create his theatre pieces, insights into non-verbal behavior; the atypical perceptual world of the deaf, brain damaged and mentally ill; and the images he draws from his own rich imagination. Almost all of this material is non-verbal; when Wilson uses language in his theatre pieces it tends to be in one of three ways. Either it is material prepared by one of his perceptually atypical associates; or a piece of writing which Wilson has come upon and which he uses as a "readymade," often to emphasize the incapacity of language to carry meaning; or dialogue which he writes and which consists essentially of short, disconnected thoughts. Describing this latter process, Wilson says, "My head became like a TV, switching from thought to thought like flipping a dial from channel to channel." (8) In The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin, one of the actors portraying Stalin, George Ashley, sits in a rectangular glass box for part of an act, reading an essay Stalin wrote on dialectical materialism. When he is finished Ashley reads it a second time, backwards, and the suggestion is that it makes the same sense, forwards or backwards.

I have discussed some of the strategies Wilson employs in constructing his theatre pieces. I would like to discuss briefly some of the strategies used in the performance of those pieces. The most notable aspect of Wilson's theatre is its pace. Wilson slows down physical action so that it can be presented in all of its complexity. Time prevents us from consciously perceiving

much of the non-verbal activity in which we are immersed. Wilson stretches time out, lengthens it, so that it can take a performer thirty minutes to rise from a chair, or forty-five minutes to cross the stage. Wilson also expands the length of the performance; the spectator who saw The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin entered the theatre at seven in the evening and emerged at seven the next morning. At some point during the night the spectator would most likely doze briefly, and have the experience of the world of his dreams blending into the world of images upon the stage, inner and outer reality merging, the line between them being obliterated. Wilson also uses objects and characters together which have no logical connection to each other. There is no plot, no narrative, nothing motivating the characters. The strategy appears to be to get the spectator to shut down the mechanism which assigns "meaning" to everything. This activity, searching for meaning, quickly becomes a futile project; the spectator will have to transfer his attention elsewhere, to the fresh apprehension of non-verbal, non-discursive experiences. In another strategy, Wilson employs enough redundancy in the structure of the material to enable the attentive spectator to perceive patterns emerging in the work. In describing his staging of his two act, two-character piece, I Was Sitting on My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating, Wilson indicates that he gave Act II to Lucinda Childs, watched her develop the movement for it for about a month, and then developed the movement for the first act "in complimentary contrast to hers." (9)

The objective of Wilson's theatre is to present to the spectator new insights into the perceptual field through which he walks daily; to arouse his consciousness to the magical and beautiful world in which he lives. In reference to our communication model, Wilson has developed various strategies to awaken the apprehension and appreciation of those non-verbal channels through which a great deal of communication takes place.

Robert Wilson's world is an expansive one; the spectator looks outside of himself and sees his world freshly, he is filled now with new understandings and perceptions. Richard Foreman's vision turns inward, and involves a minute examination of the process undertaken to transform the perceptual field into perception.

Foreman was born and grew up near New York City. He was an undergraduate at Brown University, and got an M.F.A. from the Yale School of Drama, concentrating, under John Gassner, on playwriting. Although some critics have spoken of his theatre

as being primarily a visual one, Foreman has repeatedly spoken of himself as a playwright. Foreman is more than a playwright, however, for he is also director, designer, scenery builder, and highly visible stage manager of all of his plays.

Foreman acknowledges several important influences on his work. The first of these is the theatre of Bertold Brecht, and Brecht's development of various techniques for making the material of his plays seem strange, or "alienated," so that the spectator would be forced to respond to it freshly. A second important influence was the experimental American filmmaker and critic, Jonas Mekas. Foreman began his career as a more or less realistic playwright; it was only after working with Mekas for three years that Foreman developed his ideas about what for his theatre should take. A third major influence on Foreman was the criticism and fiction of Gertrude Stein. Foreman was particularly taken with Stein's analysis of theatre, in which she said, ". . . your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening." (10) Stein was saying that the spectator was involved either in relating to the material that had already been developed, or in projecting that material into the future, in thinking about what has happened or what might happen. Because of this, he was not attending to what was happening at the particular moment it was happening. To remedy this, Stein proposed "landscape plays," plays which had no action, but which gave the spectator the opportunity to examine at leisure the various elements of the play and their relationships, as one would examine a landscape painting.

Like Stein, Foreman is interested in the "stream of consciousness" that was postulated by Stein's Harvard psychology professor, William James. Foreman recounts an experience he had: "Remembering myself, on the bus about seven years ago . . . looking across the aisle through the window as we passed the Coliseum and trying to see what was happening as I was perceiving and noticing then and there that much to my surprise, what was happening in perception was not a sustaining of what I was seeing or thinking about even if I TRIED to sustain a subject—but what was of necessity happening in consciousness was a continual presentation and re-presentation every millisecond of subject matter. Even if the subject matter was the same over a minute period, it was presented, wiped out in a millisecond, and then immediately re-presented again and again. That was the way things had to be in the consciousness." (11) This analysis of the nature of human perception becomes the center of Foreman's

theatre. To Foreman, individuals are too hidebound by traditional perceptions of reality to actually notice what is going on in their world. They perceive something in the center, something which matches their expectations of what should be there; they force reality to be what they want it to be. To Foreman existence involves a tension between the objective realities of the outer world, and the subjective realities of the inner one, and it is a false though comforting notion that these two areas will ever cohere.

To relate these ideas to our communications model, Westley and MacLean spoke of the process of communication as involving a selection of items from the immediate environment of the individual sending out the message. Foreman would like to change this, and rather than abstracting certain elements from the field as the subject of transmission, he would instead regard the entire field as the material to be transmitted. The concept of "field" is extremely important to Foreman; he believes that the artist is presumptious when he selects the material that the spectator should see and leads that spectator to a particular conclusion. "The work of art should be a field for noticing . . . it should INVITE the viewer to SEE what's THERE." (12) The old art would lead the spectator to discover surprise. The art that Foreman proposes will prompt the spectator to be alert to what he is seeing and how he is seeing it. He will now find the surprise in a condition of stasis.

Implicit in Foreman's view is the idea that in the process of communication, there are a variety of social and intellectual attitudes which underlie the process of encoding and decoding. Foreman would like to disrupt the process of decoding, its abstraction of certain central elements from the mass of elements presented, its assumption of certain social attitudes, and force the spectator to encounter and deal with all of the elements that exist within the field that is being presented to him.

Unlike Wilson, who will not discuss his plays and their "meaning," Foreman has written and spoken extensively about his work. He has been quite explicit about the matter that he wishes to communicate to the spectator: the idea that reality can be perceived as a continuous presentation of "fields," and the strategy used to communicate this: a theatre piece which unfolds a continuous series of perceptual fields as they would occur in the mind of a playwright who was in the process of writing a play.

The theatre piece takes the form of a series of tableaux, continuously being composed, held, and then recomposed. Thus, the spectator is presented with a series of visual fields, each

maintained for sufficient time for him to examine all of the elements present, actors, scenery, props. Dialogue is present, although it generally comes from a pre-recorded tape, either in Foreman's voice or in the voices of all of the actors, each taking turns speaking one word at a time. The actor who is supposed to be speaking identifies himself by mouthing some of the words along with the tape. The dialogue is coming from the field; meaning must emerge from the field, not from concentration on any one particular part of it. Foreman is present, sitting at a table that contains tape recorders, buzzers, buttons, and other paraphenalia. Soon the spectator realizes that what is being documented in the performance is Foreman's mind going through the process of writing a play.

There are many other elements that Foreman uses in his theatre pieces to present his basic message. Slide projections of legends which contain either exposition relating to the characters of the play or direct address about how the play should be perceived, and various framing devices, both aural, such as buzzers, and visual, such as the use of curtains, which isolate each particular thought, are two of the more prominent ones. Foreman has spoken of how he seeks to interrupt the sense of "flow," the manner in which most perception occurs, of how he seeks to block every avenue of habitual response, in order to force the spectator to examine the material being presented to him, not by seeking a center that evolves from one scene to the next, but rather by learning to examine a series of discrete perceptual fields. The spectator, as Bonnie Marranaca says, ". . . is led to perceive things as they are in themselves—not by learned patterns of Perception but in an unconditioned way. Oberservation [now] supersedes memory." (13)

Thus, Foreman's work can be viewed as centering on an aspect of the communication process, the manner in which we decode the material that we perceive. It is a critique of the manner in which that process normally takes place, and suggests that we frequently fail to see reality because we rely upon stale modes of thought and unwarranted abstractions of a few elements from the larger field in which they exist, which is a vital part of their significance.

Both Wilson and Foreman are among the most interesting workers in current experimental theatre in America. The experimental theatre of the 1950's, the Theatre of the Absurd, dealt with the experience of existential angst; the experimental theatre of the 1960's dealt with political questions, perhaps unavoidably in light of Viet-Nam. Important experimental theatres of the 1970's are dealing with questions of communication, seeking to enhance the manner in which the spectator perceives the world in which he lives and communicates.

NOTES

[1]Bruce H. Westley and Malcom S. MacLean, Jr. "A Conceptual Model for Communication Research," published in 1957 in Journalism Quarterly, and discussed in Mortensen, Communication, pp. 43-45, ff.

[2]Mortensen, p. 29.

[3]Robert Wilson, in Tomkins, The Scene, p. 240.

[4]Wilson in New American Plays, v. 3, p. 248.

[5]Wilson in Tomkins, p. 254.

[6]Aragon, Performing Arts Journal, 1, p. 4.

[7]Tomkins, p. 233.

[8]Wilson, The Drama Review, Dec. 1977, p. 76.

[9]Wilson, The Drama Review, Dec. 1977, p. 77.

[10]Gertrude Stein, Writings and Lectures, p. 59.

[11]Richard Foreman, Plays and Manifestos, p. 190.

[12]Foreman, p. 141.

[13]Bonnie Marranca, The Theatre of Images, p. 8.

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